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ABSTRACT

Reference group theory suggests that a perceived similarity between interacting individuals leads to future interaction, increased source credibility, and more frequent agreement on specific issues. This study shows how the reference group theory applies to the authoritarian television character Archie Bunker and television viewers that watch "All In The Family" (AITF). The responses of 309 television viewers in a telephone survey established the subjects' socioeconomic status, perceived similarity to Archie Bunker, perceived social reality and consciousness raising effect of AITF, and the reinforcement effect of watching AITF. Results indicated that subjects in agreement with Archie Bunker are more apt to think that AITF reveals real behavior, that viewers cognitively similar to Archie Bunker are made more aware of their opinions by watching AITF, and that cognitive similarity and socioeconomic status are predictors of longitudinal cognitive reinforcement effects (the more such viewers watched AITF, the more they found themselves agreeing with Archie). The study concludes that watching AITF increases the affective behaviors of authoritarian viewers, and that television producers and programmers have a responsibility to use television as a positive social force in society. (RL)

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The Psychological Effect of Television Characters: The Case of Archie Bunker and Authoritarian Viewers

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The Psychological Effect of Television Characters: The Case of Archie Bunker and Authoritarian Viewers

The electronic media have vastly changed the lives of modern men in a relatively short time. When television was first developed it was seen solely as an entertainment medium and left in the hands of businessmen. Recently, however, we have come to suspect that a television program that reaches millions of people in their own homes can have a greater effect on the thinking of its audience than a play or book, or even a movie. Most research and thinking has concerned news and public affairs programs and their effects, but lately, programs designed purely for entertainment have been studied.

In the past few years we have been dramatically shown what far-reaching effects the decisions of mass media executives, a relatively small number of people, can have on the entire country. We find that we must now begin to consider the "success" of a television program as dependent on more than its economic results. We must consider how it will shape the thinking of television viewers.

As we become more aware of the ramifications of television content we are faced with the realization that we must be responsible for the good of society in our broadcasting decisions. This realization saddles mass media businessmen with a responsibility that they never asked for, that they are seldom equipped to handle, and that they now resist accepting.

Following is a study of the effects on one character on one television program: Archie Bunker on "All In The Family." This example dramatically shows both our power and our responsibilities for all entertainment programming. Based on this study, it must be concluded that the future calls for a balance that will keep television economically viable, but will also make it socially responsible.

Theoretical Base

Reference Group Theory suggests that perceived similarity of cognitive structure between interacting individuals leads to future interaction, increased source credibility, and a greater incidence of agreement on specific issues.[1] Recent thinking among mass communication theorists includes mediated communication as a method by which reference group identification may occur.[2]

If it is theoretically feasible for a television viewer to construe the cognitive structure of a television character (not the structure of the actor but of the person he portrays) then it is feasible that actual reference group identifications can be simulated with measurable effects. Consequently, these effects would parallel the effects resulting from true interpersonal interaction with a significant other.

This study takes this rationale and attempts to test it for a particular character portrayed on a specific program. The character Archie Bunker on "All in the Family" is selected for several reasons. First, the producer of the program has attempted to give this character a well-defined and well-developed personality. Second, viewer identification with this particular character has implications concerning the personality development and coping behavior of viewers leading to important societal consequences such as prejudice, alienation, and intolerance. Third, a certain body of knowledge concerning this character already exists from which greater insights into the present findings can be drawn and upon which future research can be built.

The Genesis of Archie as Significant Other

Television producer Norman Lear intended to make Archie and his fellow characters on "All in the Family" multi-dimensional, differentiated, and differentiable.[3] Archie was fully intended to be the highly authoritarian

working-class husband and father that he is generally perceived as being. Aside from recieving high ratings, the measurable aspect of an enormously entertaining program, the program has generated a great deal of serious academic research.[4]

This research is unanimous in one particular finding, and in its subsequent interpretation. Viewers high in authoritatian beliefs and thinking are in greater agreement with Archie than viewers with low authoritarian personality profiles. Each researcher has inferred a reinforcement of authoritarian, prejudiced, and non-coping behavior in our pluralistic society by the type of viewer who agrees with Archie. This viewer has also been interpreted as being the least able to cope with society to begin with.

These findings have been vulnerable on one methodological issue. Even though sound psychological theory would predict the inference made from each researcher's findings, no one has approximated longitudinal effects. Thus, causal effects could only be inferred. Does viewing "All in the Family" and using Archie Bunker as a referent significant other lead to an increase in authoritarian beliefs and thinking, i.e. does it lead to "greater" agreement with Archie's point of view.

The present study will take a demographic variable, social class, and a variable which operationalizes perceived similarity of cognitive structure, similarity of stance on issues, and predict viewer reinforcement of authoritarian thinking. The main hypothesis and corollary hypotheses are:

H_1: High authoritarian and low social class viewers will percieve "All in the Family" as revealing reality to a greater degree. (Perceived social reality effect)

H_2: High authoritarian and low social class viewers will be made more aware of their opinions after viewing "All in the Family". (Consciousness raising effect)

H_3: Viewing of "All in the Family" leads to increased authoritarian thinking by high authoritarian and low social class viewers. (Reinforcement of cognitive structure effect)

Study

A sample of viewers was obtained from Athens, Georgia. The selection of respondents was based on the 1970 United States Census tracts for that city. Six tracts were judgmentally selected which afforded the best split on middle and lower socio-economic status residents.

The selected tracts were outlined on an Athens street map. The streets which were contained within each of the tracts were listed, and, through the use of a street-ordered telephone directory, telephone numbers were systematically selected. Telephone interviews were completed by interviewers trained personally by the major author. All interviews were completed within a three-day period during February 1975.

A total of 587 telephone numbers were selected. Of the 587 numbers, 309 resulted in successfully completed interviews; 91 people refused to be interviewed, 41 numbers were out of order or disconnected, and 146 numbers were not home/busy/no answer. Thus, for the 400 people actually contacted by telephone the successful completion rate was 77%.

Socio-economic status for each respondent was established through the question, "What does the head of the household do for a living?" This open-ended question was coded according to a scale obtained from the 1960 U. S. Census Bureau. The socio-economic status of the respondents was collapsed into three groups (according to where they fell on the Census Bureau's scale of 1 to 100): eighty-three and above was called high-socio-economic status; sixty to eighty-two was called middle-socio-economic status; and fifty-nine and below was called low-socio-economic status.[5] Of the total number of respondents (N=309) there were: sixty-eight high socio-economic status respondents (n=68); ninety-five middle socio-economic status respondents (n=95); and, one-hundred and forty-six low socio-economic status respondents (n=146).

Cognitive similarity with Archie Bunker was operationalized through the response to this item: "I generally agree with Archie Bunker's point of view". Subjects responded on a five-interval Likert scale running from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". Respondents were categorized into either an "agree" group (including both "Strongly Agree" and "Agree" responses) and a "non-agree" group (all other responses). There were ninety-three "agrees" (n=93) and two-hundred and sixteen "non-agrees" (n=216).

The dependent variables were measured on five-interval Likert items running from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree". The "perceived social reality" item stated, "'All in the Family' reveals how the types of people shown on the program behave in real life". The "consciousness raising" item stated, "Viewing 'All in the Family' makes me more aware of my opinions about what is happening in the world today". The "reinforcement of cognitive structure" item stated, "The more I watch 'All in the Family' the more I find myself agreeing with Archie".

The "reinforcement of cognitive structure" item overcomes the major criticism of prior findings by measuring a longitudinal effect. An item which asks a respondent to judge a longitudinal effect is a commonly accepted method used by survey researchers in lieu of multiple time-lapsed surveys.[6] This approximation of a longitudinal effect is particularly justified if respondents do, in fact, have their "consciousness raised" concerning their opinions through the viewing of "All in the Family".

Findings

A significant moderate correlation exists between the two independent variables (r=.29). The lower socio-economic status individuals tend to be more in agreement with Archie's point of view than are the higher socio-economic status respondents. However, independent variable main effects are noted.

The first hypothesis is supported in part. (See Table #1)

-- Table # 1 about here --

As hypothesized, subjects who are in general agreement with Archie's point of view are more apt to agree that "All in the Family" reveals real behavior. However, this is not true of low socio-economic status subjects. Likewise, being in agreement and low socio-economic status does not enhance the reality perception.

The second hypothesis is again partially supported and in the same manner as the first. (See Table #2) Clearly, viewers who are cognitively

-- Table # 2 about here --

similar to Archie are more apt to become aware of what their opinions actually are as a result of viewing "All in the Family."
As before, all respondents are, on the average, in the "agree" area. However, respondents cognitively similar to Archie are close to the "Strongly Agree" area. The social class variable is not systematically predictive alone or in interaction with the cognitive similarity variable.

The third, and more important, hypothesis is totally and very strongly supported. (See Table #3) Both cognitive similarity and social class

-- Table # 3 about here --

predict a longitudinal cognitive reinforcement effect. Overall, the subjects are neutral in their response on this item ($\bar{x}$ = 3.23). However, respondents cognitively similar to Arhcie "agree" that the reinforcement effect occurs with them ($\bar{x}$ = 2.46). The low social class respondents are significantly more reinforced than are middle or high social class respondents.

Finally, an interaction effect is noted. There is a tendency for the respondent who is low socio-economic status, and cognitively similar to Archie to percieve a greater reinforcement effect. The subgroup mean score responses range from $\bar{x}$ = 2.26 for the low socio-economic status, agree with Archie subgroup to $\bar{x}$ = 4.33 for the high socio-economic status, not agree with Archie subgroup.

Analyses and Conclusions

Quite clearly, television viewers do exhibit a wide ranging difference in the manner by which they perceive a portrayed television character as being cognitively similar to themselves. The viewers who perceive a greater amount of similarity are more affected by the television character. This effect encompasses one's perception of social reality, the raising of one's consciousness concerning one's own opinions, and the reinforcement of the portrayed character's opinions and beliefs upon the viewer. These effects are predictable through Reference Group Theory.

Social class is moderately correlated with the cognitive similarity variable but it is not as good a predictor of the variables we measured. Thus, evidence points to the greater predictive strength of a psychological, as opposed to a sociological, approach for future viewer-television character identification research.

This study used Archie Bunker of "All in the Family" as the television character of identification. Unfortunately, viewers cognitively similar to Archie are having their beliefs raised to a level of consciousness and then reinforced. This can only lead to greater degrees of prejudice, closedmindedness, and continued non-coping behavior in our pluralistic society.

Hopefully, the producers of this program, and all television programming, will become aware of the influence television characters have upon their viewers. Once becoming aware they should commit themselves to becoming more socially responsible in the way a television character's cognitive structure is presented. Through the conscious use of referent television characters, television entertainmemt programming could reach its potential as a positive social force in our society.

Footnotes

1. Surlin, Stuart H. "Reference Group Theory as a Predictor of Message Source Effects", Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Communication, Michigan State University, 1974.
2. Kline, F. Gerald and Phillip J. Tichenor (Eds.). Current Perspectives in Mass Communication Research (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1972).
3. Laurent, Lawrence. "Popular TV Shows Focus on Visceral Involvement", Atlanta-Constitution, Feb. 4, 1973, p. 19-F.
4. Surlin, Stuart H. "Five Years of 'All in the Family': Stimulus and Response, A Summary of Empirical Research Generated by the Program", Paper presented to Speech Communication Association, Houston, Texas, December 1975.
5. The numerical break-off points for each social class subgroup was judgmentally made based upon a qualitative estimate of the ratings given certain types of occupations. For example: high SES, accountant (92) and social worker (85); middle SES, pilot (79) and plumber (64); low SES, carpenter (50) and janitor (18). See: U.S. Bureau of the Census, Methodology and Scores of Socioeconomic Status, Working Paper No. 15 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1963).
6. Babbie, Earl R. Survey Research Methods, Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1973, pp. 65-66.

Table #1

2-Way ANOVA Using

Social Class and Agreement

With Archie to Predict

AITF Reveals Real Behavior

(N=309)

Mean Scores (Range 1-5, 1 = Strongly Agree)

Overall = 2.38

Social Class		$\bar{X}$
(n = 146)	Low	2.37
(n = 95)	Medium	2.25
(n = 68)	High	2.52

Agreement with Archie		$\bar{X}$
(n = 93)	Agree	2.14
(n = 216)	Not Agree	2.62

Source of Variance	DF	SS	MS	F	P
Main Effects:					
Social Class	2	2.31	1.16	1.15	0.32
Agreement with Archie	1	11.29	11.29	11.23	<0.001
Interaction:					
Social Class x Agreement	2	1.54	0.77	0.77	0.46
Error	303	304.60	1.00		

Table #2

2-Way ANOVA Using

Social Class and Agreement

With Archie to Predict

AITF Makes Me Aware of My Own Opinions

(N = 309)

Mean Scores (Range 1-5, 1 = Strongly Agree)

Overall = 2.40

Social Class		$\bar{X}$
(n = 146)	Low	- 2.36
(n = 95)	Medium	- 2.53
(n = 68)	High	- 2.30

Agreement with Archie		$\bar{X}$
(n = 93)	Agree	- 2.14
(n = 216)	Not Agree	- 2.65

Source of Variance	DF	SS	MS	F	P
Main Effects:					
Social Class	2	1.76	0.88	0.84	0.43
Agreement with Archie	1	12.00	12.00	11.48	$\leq$ 0.001
Interaction:					
Social Class x Agreement	2	0.26	0.13	0.12	0.88
Error	303	316.64	1.04		

Table #3

2-Way ANOVA Using

Social Class and Agreement

With Archie to Predict

The More I Watch AITF the More I Agree with Archie

(N = 309)

Mean Scores (Range 1-5, 1 = Strongly Agree)

Overall = 3.23

Social Class			Agreement with Archie		
		$\bar{x}$			$\bar{x}$
(n = 146)	Low	- 2.97	(n = 93)	Agree	- 2.46
(n = 95)	Medium	- 3.37	(n = 216)	Not Agree	- 4.00
(n = 68)	High	- 3.36			

Source of Variance	DF	SS	MS	F	P
Main Effects:					
Social Class	2	6.44	3.22	4.18	0.02
Agreement with Archie	1	113.19	113.19	147.13	< 0.001
Interaction:					
Social Class x Agreement	2	4.02	2.01	2.61	0.08
Error	303	233.10	0.77		